

GOD *the only* LAW-GIVER,
able to save and to destroy.

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S E R M O N

Preach'd at the
Cathedral-Church
O F
E X E T E R,
On *Tuesday, August 20, 1717;*
At the ASSIZES held for the County
of DEVON,
B E F O R E
Mr. Justice E T R E.

By DANIEL NEWCOMB, M. A. Rector of
Whimble in DEVON, and Chaplain to
his Grace the Duke of BEDFORD.

Publish'd at the Request of the HIGH-SHERIFF,
some Gentlemen of the GRAND-JURY, and
many other Gentlemen of the County of
DEVON, and of the City of EXETER.

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T O

Sir HENRY LANGFORD, Bar'.

HIGH-SHERIFF;

A N D T O

Sir JOHN ROGERS, Bar'.

FORE-MAN of the GRAND-JURY
of the COUNTY of DEVON,

T H I S

S E R M O N

Is Dedicated,

With the greatest Respect and
Humility,

By their most Humble Servant,

D. N.

TO

ST. JOHN ROBERTS, B.A.
HIGH SCHOOL

AND TO

ST. JOHN ROBERTS, B.A.

FORWARD OF THE
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ST. JOHN ROBERTS, B.A.

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With the greatest respect
Humbly

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JAMES IV. 12.

*There is one Law-giver who
is able to save and to
destroy: Who art thou
that judgest another!*



ABOVE all the ill Effects of religious Controversies, condemning the Consciencies and Souls of Men, together with their Errors, is never to be justified, is extreemly wicked, and yet prevails generally on any Side, whether right or wrong, in the Merits of the Cause, under the Notion of Piety, and great and good Regard for pure Truth and Orthodoxy. To judge and distinguish for one self Truth from Error, with the most Strictness, is the Right and Duty of every Man. But judging what Degrees of Guilt must lie upon other Men's Souls for erroneous Perswasions, which the knowing Judge alone can well and truly

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charge,

charge, is usurping that Authority, which God peculiarly reserves to himself.

AND this is denied to us for no less Reasons, than because we are by no Means fit to discharge such a Sort of Jurisdiction. For we cannot pretend to know other Men's Hearts; we are not able to see where even *Heretical Pravity* Rules, where, as St. Paul defines it, * *A Man is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of himself*: Or where again the Turn of an odd, unaccountable Understanding, Weakness and Ignorance, put others under the insuperable Misfortunes of wrong Perswasions in Religion; which no doubt the most Righteous God will mercifully consider as insuperable Misfortunes, tho' Men are hard to be perswaded to it. But in that Respect, that the *Ways of God are not as our Ways, nor his Thoughts as our Thoughts*: Our Blessed Saviour has very clearly taught us, Luke 12. 47. 48. *That Servant which knew his Lord's Will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his Will, shall be beaten with many Stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit Things worthy of Stripes, shall be beaten with few Stripes.* We may assure our selves, that it is not committed to Men who are Subject to the Infirmities and Faults of Passions and Mistakes, Resentments and Partiality, to have the everlasting Fate of other Men's Souls in their absolute Disposal, whatever good Will any of us may have to be meddling in that high Province. The Apostle in the

* Tit. 3.
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the Words of the Text is peremptory, That *that there is one Lawgiver who is able to save and to destroy*, and asks any one to reflect immediately, how rash and arrogant it must then be in us to pretend to *judge* one another; intimating, that our Censures and Condemnations are Offences against the Majesty of God, that all the Damage of them must be to ourselves, but can be of no Efficacy to the eternal State of other Men's Souls, since there is one *Law-giver*, who has the Universal, Supream, Spiritual Authority over the Souls of all Men, and has fix'd the Terms and Conditions on which their Eternal Life or Death shall turn.

In Speaking to this Subject, I intend in the

First Place to state what Sort of *Judging* is forbidden in the Text, with the Force of the Apostles Reason against it.

AND then to make some general Inferences from the Principle: *That there is one Lawgiver who is able to save and to destroy.*

I. LET us consider what Sort of *Judging* is forbidden in the Text, and that I think deserves to be stated a little more particularly, not so much to take off any Uncertainty, what *Judging* is here decided to be above our Sphere, as to put us every one in Mind of our Duty to judge with Integrity, and in the Fear of God, in all Things, that are indeed within the Bounds of our Determination.

It seems plain enough, that the Apostle disallows any Men's Pretensions to condemn other Men's Souls. For that, he directly tells us, belongs to God's Dominion, and that all Mankind are equally subject to it. It is true *κείνω* may signifie no more than to judge, but from the Scope and Connection of several Places, it appears often in the New Testament to import as much as *κατακείνω*, *καταδικάζω*. And so in our English Translation, *κείνω* is † sometimes rendered to condemn. That I take to be the exact Sense of the Word in the Text. Spiritual Condemnation is the Cause which is here solely and universally excepted from human Judicature. And so this Sentence does indeed effectually cut off all the Business, and grave Solemnities of spiritual Inquisitors; but the Authority of Civil Magistrates to condemn and punish Offences against the Civil Power, is not at all affected by it. And that there certainly is not equal Reason for spiritual Tribunals, as there is for the Office of Judges in Civil Matters, may be easily made appear.

For,

First, Crimes against civil Government are visible Actions, capable of being proved upon Offendors by the Testimony of Sense; and to impeach the Authority of Magistrates to pass Condemnation on Facts of Oppression, Injustice, and all sorts of Violence, it can never be pleaded, that treasonable Practices, Murders and Fellowies, were

no more in a Man's Choice and Power, than our inward Prepossession of Mind, or that those Enormities are as consistent with Uprightness of Heart, as involuntary Mistakes may be. It may be true, altho' Civil Courts are to proceed according to proper Evidence of criminal Facts, that sometimes innocent Men may be condemn'd as guilty, from some horrid Corruption somewhere; or some very strange and unlucky Circumstance, when Judges, Jury, and Witnesses, all discharge their Duty. But in this I am positive still, that there is not equal Danger, that Civil Magistrates, in judging Men for their outward Actions, may do as much Wrong, and condemn the Innocent as commonly as Criminals, which the Judges of other Men's Consciences may easily do; because those Judges can take no Cognizance of the accus'd Person's Heart wherein the whole Guilt is suppos'd to lodge.

Secondly, The Coercive Power of Men is commensurate to the Ends and Purposes of Civil Magistrates, to chastise Crimes against the temporal Welfare of Mankind, to recompence them as nearly as possible in their own Kind, to punish disorderly and unruly Persons with Confinement and Correction, Cheats and Impostors with Fines and Marks of publick Infamy, and the greatest Offenders by whom the rest of the World cannot live, with the Loss of their Lives: And no Body will deny that this Power of
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GOD *the only* LAW-GIVER,

Magistrates, to inflict temporal Punishments on visible Crimes, which Men know may be brought to Light and prov'd upon them, is constantly of great Use to preserve the World in Order. There would be no living in the World if no Penalties and Inconveniencies could be levied against the Advantages, the Mischiefs, and revengful Actions that are prejudicial to our Civil Rights. But then Fire and Fagot, Wracks and Imprisonment, reach not spiritual Wickedness, Men's Thoughts are to themselves, free to be hidden from all the World; and therefore the Power of Men cannot be said to be commensurate to the Cure of Spiritual Evil, or to overcome false Opinions in Religion.

Thirdly, Civil Judges are necessary, because Self-Interest has too much Power to let Men be Impartial Judges in their own Cause. Controversies on Matters of personal Right and Property would be endless, if there were no Appeals beyond the Resolutions, Men would only think fit to make for themselves, and then Force at last must be the Rule of peaceable Possession, and injured Men must be left without Redress. But for spiritual Judges of other Men's Thoughts, there is nothing like the same Cause. It can not be argued, that they are necessary to right the Injured, and relieve the Oppressed. For no Person can say, that he is wrong'd, or the worse as to the Safety of his Soul, because another Man is irregular in his Faith,

Faith. And if any one makes himself uneasy on that Account, what is it but his own Fault? There is a Defect of Knowledge in the truest Believers to reach the Heart of others that are erroneous, and to determine with what Affections and what Intentions such Persons either at first received, or have afterwards persisted in any false Notions of Religion. So that we cannot judiciously condemn Men for those Opinions, which, according to our Notions, we may think there is Cause for us to detest. That is the arbitrary Judging which God forbids in the Text, telling us, that the *Judicature* over Men's Souls is his Prerogative. And if Men could presume to claim a Part in God's Authority to oblige other Men's Thoughts, it would after all be of very little Use and Effect; because we could never know with all our Skill when that Authority is obey'd, or wilfully despised; when Men's Thoughts are right, and agree with their Professions, and when they only give us Words, and deceive us. Neither is it in the Power of Men, by using Force and Penalties, to correct other Men's Belief, and therefore such Judgments are not alike necessary for Religion, nor like to do the same Good in that Cause, as civil Judgments are able to do in their proper Way.

LET it be certain, I know it, it is a Christian Duty to be *zealously affected* in a good and true Cause, and to *contend earnestly*
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for the Faith, which was once delivered to the Saints. Yet when a Man goes on beyond confuting the Absurdity and Unreasonableness of a false Tenet, to determin it to be a mortal Sin in another Person, that it is owing to a malicious and wicked Heart to oppose the Truth, which makes such an Opposition Damnable. That, I say, is wicked, uncharitable judging; for it implies more than another Man can ever know, and it makes nothing to the Advancement of the Truth; but may accidentally raise Passions of Revenge and Obstinacy, to carry Men still farther the other Way.

ALL this Time, I am not supposing, that we are debarr'd from judging such Opinions of other Men to be false. That we have a Right to do, since we have a Right to distinguish Truth from Error: But the Extent of that lets us only conclude, that such Sentiments are false, or, as the Schoolmen speak, *materially heretical*; but when and where *formal Heresy* takes place, can never be decided by us. Nor therefore can Men ever pretend with Justice to condemn and punish that Sin: For Punishments have no other Colour of Justice, than that they are laid upon Guilt. And if it be agreed, that Cruelties and Persecutions in the pure Cause of Religion, are not always certainly Acts of Justice, because they do not go upon Proof. And they should be said nevertheless to be justifiable Methods to guard the Cause of
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true Religion, as they may be Expedients to affright Men into a right Mind, I desire to answer, that *That* need not be our Care: Men have much more urgent Motives from God to be sincere in Religion, than worldly Troubles can be thought. Since God has the Power of inflicting an Eternal Sentence, and *Men can only kill the Body*, which is a Punishment the World agrees to be far short of that Vengeance such Sinners deserve, and shall assuredly receive from God.

Now the Apostle offers it to our Thoughts, how it can become us to pass condemnation on other Men's Souls, when we our selves are but in the Condition of accountable Creatures to a Supream Law-giver, *who is able to save and to destroy*: Who is infinitely above erring in Judgment; whom concealed Sinners cannot escape; and who has Almighty Power to put his Righteous Sentences in Execution for Sins of Men's Souls, which are committed against him *only*, and are *only* set in his Sight, and which he *alone* can and will punish after their Deservings: And that should be sufficient to satisfy us, that this Matter will be effectually done without us, that we may refrain our Zeal and Anger, least Hypocrites, and self-condemn'd Unbelievers should escape unpunished, And as we need not be putting in to settle the just Doom of those *whose Judgment now lingereth not, and whose Damnation slumbereth not*; so indeed it is vain and frivolous in Men to spend their Zeal that Way:

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For we must know, we have not Power to make, what we would be at, answer our Will; And we know him that hath said, *Vengeance is mine, I will recompence saith the Lord.* Beside, God has expressly forbidden us by St.

Rom. 14. 4 Paul to judge, ἀλλότριον δικάζειν another's Servant to his own Master, he standeth or-fall-eth: So that in Reason and Conscience we are obliged to restrain and govern our Regard for Orthodoxy within this *Prohibition*, which is founded on God's Sole Right to judge, to acquit, or condemn the Souls of Men by a righteous Sentence. I proceed now,

II. To make some general Inferences from this Principle, *That there is one Lawgiver able to save and to destroy.*

First, That the Terms of Salvation are sufficiently appointed in the reveal'd Will of God. That I assert to be the only sure Rule of religious Faith, because no Doctrine, which has not that Foundation, appears to be from God; and he only can enact the Laws and Conditions that will admit or exclude us out of Heaven for ever: So that the sacred Scriptures are the compleat Rule of divine Truths, and all things generally necessary to be observed and believed to Salvation, must be perfectly taught there. Otherwise the reveal'd Will of God could not be a sufficient Rule to eternal Life, and from hence we have a fair Criterion for Distinguishing the necessary and essential Points of Religion from others, in which Mistake or
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Ignorance will not be directly destructive of Salvation. For by this Rule all necessary Duties are fully and evidently determin'd in Scripture, or clearly deducible from it: And for other Matters which are ambiguously express'd, so as to be capable of probable Solutions several Ways, Errors there, we may be secure, will not be one way or other prejudicial to Salvation; unless they are held in Uncharitableness, and Men suffer themselves to be carry'd by the Heat of Disputation into sinful Passions for their Mistakes.

BT if any one will say, that Mistake in any single Point of Divine Truth, (a Man not knowing it to be so,) must be dangerous to Salvation: Then it should be true, that a right and safe Faith must imply nothing less, than a right Acceptation of the true Intent and Meaning of every Sentence in the *Bible*: And then I would know, what Man alive could hope to be sav'd; For who can profess, that he sees the true Intent and Meaning of every Difficulty in Scripture? But if it be enough to believe explicitly every thing, that God has expressly appointed and inabled us to do, having an implicit Faith in the whole Truth of God's Word, where perhaps we are not able to take it right, then it follows, that Ignorance and Mistake as to some Points of Divine Revelation, will not put Men out of the Condition of being sav'd. Tht infinite Danger lies only in disobeying and rejecting those things which are evidently and plainly

prescribed to us by God; and these are not set above the Sight of any Man, who is dispos'd, and does his sincere Endeavours in the Love of Truth, to regulate his Faith and Life by the Standard of the Christian Religion. And since God has sufficiently provided for the Instruction of Christians in Things universally necessary to Salvation: We have,

Secondly, Another general Conclusion that Men may safely judge for themselves in Matters of Religion. Besides that, this is warranted by the Son of God, *John 5. 39. Search the Scriptures.* By St. Paul, *1 Thess. 5. 21. Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.* By St. John, *1 Epist. 4. 1. Believe not every Spirit, but try the Spirits whether they be of God.* Does it not seem extremely reasonable, that Men should think and judge for themselves, when every one must expect to bear his own Burden and answer for himself? But with what Justice could we suppose that Infidelity was punishable either here or hereafter, if we had no Liberty, if it was forbidden us to apply our Minds to discern Truth from mortal Err! God cannot be that *Hard Master* to require us to acknowledge and obey the Truth at our infinite Peril, and deny us the Means and Comfort of satisfying ourselves, when we do so: To make Religion our Eternal Concern, and not suffer us to employ our Thoughts upon it. It is Understanding that raises us above Brute Creatures, and makes us capable of
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Religion; and it must have been a strange Turn of Christianity, if *that* had made it a Principle for us to renounce our Understanding, and cease to be Men, that we might be Christians.

THE Inconsistencies Men place to Religion may want the Helps of Darkeness and Folly to cover them. Implicit Faith is an effectual Prescription to confirm endless Absurdity: So Popery is supported against all Sense and Reason by the Neglect and Disuse of God's Word, and the confident and tyrannical Condemnation of all Enquiries which might make People wiser.

I own there is a Solution for keeping Men under the hard Servitude of a blind Faith, the *Infallibility of the Church*; and if it were prov'd, I say too, that there would be no Occasion for Men to read, to think, and judge for themselves. But when that exalted *Claim* cannot be made out, when it is universally agreed, that the Representatives of any particular Church are no more than fallible Men, and may err. It is strange how any among us, who believe that, and grant it, should nevertheless be for denying Men the Use of their private Judgment in Religion. That they should look upon God as their supream *Law-giver*, and resign up their Souls absolutely to Men. In the Popish Scheme the first Principle only is false, but in the latter Hypothesis there is no Consistency from one End to the other. Which will be more evident, when we have consider'd,

Thirdly,

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Thirdly, That Implicit Faith in Human Doctrine is unwarrantable. The Text debars Men from sharing in God's Spiritual Legislature: And that Men have no Power to coin Articles of Faith, St. Paul has decreed an *Anathema* against all Attempts of that kind from the infallible Spirit of God; Gal. 1. 8, 9. *Though we or an Angel from Heaven preach any other Gospel unto you, than that ye have received, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any Man preach any other Gospel unto you, than that ye have received, let him be accursed.* But for the Submission of our Understanding to the Truth of every thing in the Divine Books; we have the Security of God's infinite Wisdom and Goodness; be any Proposition never so unaccountable, there is the best and strongest Reason to believe, when God has said so, that it is worthy of all Acceptation; that it is infallible Truth. But to Human Doctrines implicit Faith cannot be reasonably paid, by their own Weight and Power, they are not fit to supersede all Doubt of Error, because the Dictates of fallible Men may be false: As in all other Reasoning the Conclusion cannot exceed the Strength of the Premises, so a doubtful Authority cannot be a Foundation for that implicit and unguarded Confidence which supposes the Impossibility of Error. Nor is it like Men who have a Sense of their great Concern in Religion to take up Principles of Religion, not as they are deservedly credible, but only because such Things are asserted to them under that solemn

lemn Name. Thus Transubstantiation is held in a blind Faith upon the *Romish* Church, not that any thinking Man does or can judge such a Thing of a Miracle and Mystery credible in his own Mind. But so it is, a Man may resolve to profess, that he takes all things to be true, which are receiv'd in the Church he belongs to, and be so profoundly ignorant, that he cannot with Truth be said to have any Sense of the Matter. Yet let Men talk what they will of believing with other Men's Faith, it is all one, as thinking with other Men's Souls. After all, it is not to be suppos'd, that those who are devoted to the absolute Authority of the Church, will profess, that they take that Resolution without any Motives, any Cause or Proof, and then even that Faith rests upon their private Judgment, however bigotted Men thoughtlessly decry it as the Principle of Heresy and all Evil.

There are two Objections commonly made to the Argument I have been defending, which I shall endeavour to answer,

First, that Humility obliges us to give up our Judgment to the Church.

Secondly, That Peace is a good Title for Custom and Prescription against Men's private Judgment.

To the first Pretence I answer, That no particular Church has a Right to that unlimited Power supposed in the Objection; that it is no better than *Usurpation* to insist upon it, and another Property in People to place

place their Religion in it. The Case is clear, suppose a Church, as that of Rome, enjoyns Idolatry, there we all say it is Peoples Duty to obey God rather than Men. Again, granting it true, that the whole Church of Christ, that is, all Christians in the World, cannot err in Things essential to Salvation, yet it is as true by all Men's Confession, that any particular Church may err; and that is an undeniable Reason for us to use our Judgment, and compare such particular Decrees with the sure Standard of divine Truth, unless we had a Way to know that those Decrees are approved by the whole Christian Church: which Satisfaction is not to be had before a Man knows the Opinion of all true Christian People in the World. And it should be their *Unanimous Opinion*: For *Orthodoxy* has not always been appropriated to the major Votes of profess'd Christians, tho' it be acknowledged to be inseparable from the whole Christian Church. Which brings me again to this Conclusion, that no human Determinations, no not of *Councils*, should oblige us not to judge for ourselves.

Secondly, It is pretended, that for the Sake of Peace, Custom and Prescription ought to over-rule Men's private Judgment. But that the Argument from all the conceivable Advantages of Peace is but contingent, and will not hold universally, I instance, that the Reformation broke in upon that Rule, against the Custom and Prescription of some Ages. And that, we say now, was done with the greatest Reason, and that the evident

and he has in y^e for his Example in our
y^e blessed Jesus

able to save and to destroy.

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dent Directions of God's undoubted Will were our Fore-fathers Warrant to forsake the impious *Innovations* the *Romish Church* had brought into the Christian Religion, and made it their Duty to renounce and protest against them.

NOR can the *Romanists* themselves maintain it, that Regard to Peace ought without Exception to prevail against all other Considerations whatsoever; unless they will condemn the Promulgation of the Christian Religion: For the Jews could say, that their Religion was in Possession, had the Prescription of many Ages, and was of Divine Original. Here the *Romanists* must stop their leading Argument against us; they cannot give the Preference to Custom and long Prescription against all *After-Judgment*, against the *Cause* which they with us acknowledge to be from God.

BUT altho' I cannot be of their Mind, who think, that Custom and the general Sense will bear out all things; yet in things of an indifferent Nature, I believe a peaceable Compliance to be not only innocent, but a Matter of Duty. Peace is more valuable, than getting a Victory over harmless Customs. And so likewise in doubtful Matters it is not right to be obstinate, and break the publick Peace: For by Compliance in doubtful things, there is little Danger of giving into destructive and damning Errors, because all things necessary to Salvation may be plainly decided by Scripture. And therefore I think

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the Happiness of Peace should prevail upon Christians to be submissive to Custom and the general Suffrage in those Matters. But still I am sure no Authority in the World can oblige or justify Men to go against their own Judgment: That *that* will not bear us harmless, St. Paul has told us, *Whatsoever is not of Faith is Sin.* I declare from my Conscience I am heartily perswaded, that *the Religion of the Church of England* is far the best Profession of the Christian Religion, that is now publickly made in any Place or Nation of the World. Yet I own, I do not see Cause to judge, that no Soul shall be sav'd, who differs from it. Not do I trouble my self, if some Men will hastily judge *this* to be blameable Moderation in the Cause of the best Religion; since I am well satisfy'd, God will not pass that Judgment on it.

LET the Sins of Hypocrisy and wilful Opposition to the Truths of God be thought hateful and wicked and dangerous as can be conceiv'd; and let all of us be careful to avoid those great and hainous Crimes: Yet *God only is greater than Men's Hearts, and knows all things,* to judge where that Guilt does certainly lie. St. Paul confesses, it was once his Case, to be a *Blasphemer, a Persecutor, and injurious,* but tells us, he obtain'd Mercy, because he *did it ignorantly in Unbelief.* And when we have that great Testimony, that Ignorance alleviates the Faults of very great Offences against the undoubted Cause of God, and is a Reason for a Man's obtaining

taining Mercy for them, surely this should be enough to put us out of Conceit with that officious Zeal of using religious Cruelties and passing damnatory Sentences even in those Cases when Men unhappily oppose what we esteem sure Points of Religion : Because we cannot be sure, but they may possibly do so without criminal Purposes to sin against God. And what God will bear with, and mercifully forgive, we who stand in need of Forgiveness on many other Accounts, should not be eager to punish or condemn. If the sacred Honour of Religion be the Cause we have at Heart, St. James has given it for a Rule, That *the Wrath of Man worketh not the Righteousness of God.* But as Controversies are too commonly managed with Mixtures of Reflection and Bitterness, with Violence and Cruelties, it is much to be fear'd, that many are driven from the Truth, by those awkward Arts to promote it. But surely no good Man would be found so doing.

But Lastly, Since we are blessed with the Knowledge of the *best Profession* of the Christian Religion; let us think ourselves obliged to make our Lives and our Temper answerable to it, to glorify and adorn the Doctrine of the *blessed Author and Finisher of Faith*, who has prescribed the highest Principles of Goodness and Compassion, Charity and Meekness, and has taught us in these happy Qualities to differ from other Men. To the Purpose I have been speaking, more particularly let us remember, that the Charity

GOD the only LAW-GIVER, &c.

rity of every Christian Soul is required to be so perfect, so generous and large, that our very Enemies are not to be hated by us. It is our Saviour's special Command, *I say unto you, love your Enemies.* By this Proof, above all the rest, he would have us distinguish our selves to be *his Disciples*, and to oblige us to all possible Clemency and Forbearance, under the Assaults of Injuries and Provocations, we are warn'd farther, that *God will not forgive us, if we forgive not Men their Trespases.* And in vain shall we call ourselves Christians, if we are acted by a contrary Spirit. Therefore let all Bitterness, and Wrath, and Anger, and Clamour, and Evil-speaking, be put away from you with all Malice. And be ye kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's Sake, hath forgiven you.

AND may the God of Peace, who brought again from the Dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the Sheep, thro' the Blood of the Everlasting Covenant, make us perfect in every good Work to do his Will, working in us, that which is well-pleasing in his Sight, thro' Jesus Christ, to whom, &c.

